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Manchester: The Visible and Invisible Cities

Manchester adopted me rather than the other way round. I went reluctantly and with no intention of staying but, 25 years later, here I am. My journey as a landscape architect has paralleled the city's journey of rediscovery and reinvention since the early '90's. There are so many Manchester's, so many layers of history and emotion - personal and collective - embedded in its streets and spaces, how to describe them to an outsider?

I might evoke Manchester, **the ruderal city**, hollowed out by the slum clearances and industrial closures of the 60's and 70's, where a third nature has reclaimed derelict sites and recycled industrial wastelands as sanctuaries of birds and butterflies. The abandoned city whose voids were first reappropriated by pioneer species – human as well as vegetable. Sites colonised by birch and buddleia, tibetan balsam and knotweed, elder and willow, or by garden escapees, fragile grasslands and bee orchids, new hybrids and plant communities prospering in poisoned lands and sharing space with the socially marginalised: the homeless, the travellers, graffiti artists, drug addicts, BMX-ers and dog fighters. Pomona Island, the abandoned Manchester port of the Ship Canal, islanded by infrastructure, a wilderness on the edge of the prospering city centre; or Clayton Vale, a lost paradise of weeds and woodlands in the wastes of a chemical works; or Chorlton Ees, where orchids grow on an old sewage works. A city where brick, steel, concrete and glass are locked in a cyclical struggle against an irrepressible nature.

And I would go on to describe Manchester, **the infill city**, remaking itself from the inside out, replacing mills with skyscrapers, filling in the gaps with the steel, glass and concrete signifiers of its newfound confidence; the northern powerhouse intoxicated with its own strapline. Instead of grasping the opportunity to reappropriate these holes as parks for the new city, every vacant plot is filled, every inconvenient building is pulled down and replaced by towers of offices or apartment blocks. History is selectively conserved and celebrated to fit the official narrative. A centre which, 20 years ago, was a pockmarked landscape of industrial survivals, failed modernist experiments, dereliction and vacancy, only called home by a crazy or unlucky few, is no longer the scene of drunken midnight brawls but silent struggles between developers for the last remaining plots, or architects over whose new skyscraper is biggest and shiniest. Density is the new mantra and height is the goal. Tall buildings are private, defensible, programmable and privileged. Public space is open, unbounded, unpredictable, diverse...dangerous.

Or perhaps I would focus on Manchester, **the accidental city**, where no strategic vision or grand design has prospered. A city where chaos theory is the regeneration strategy, reinventing itself through a series of opportunistic interventions. An algal city, responding to new stimuli blindly and dumbly. Unfinished, emerging, incomplete and full of strange contrasts. Where infrastructure spreads in fits and starts and new buildings follow it like crows in the wake of a tractor. A city where a high tech factory of mediated news and condensed culture is ringed by social housing estates built for the dockers of another city; where the new cathedrals of sport tower over back-to-backs, industrial estates and hypermarkets; where multi-storeyed student castles loom over Victorian chimneys and mills; where the inflammably-reclad social housing blocks are visually indistinguishable – but socially distinct - from the chic new high-rise apartments; where the growing hordes of the homeless and dispossessed give lie to the myth of prosperity; and where, only a short walk from the urban core, you will still find sink estates, tracts of vacant and contaminated land and rotting mills.

And then, easily overlooked, is Manchester, **the liquid city**, irrigated by an invisible network of veins and arteries, buried, canalised, enclosed, cut off or hidden. The waterways which powered the city's industrial revolution and carried away its waste and detritus are now forgotten and out of sight. The city's shiny new buildings turn their backs on the dark river Irwell, or are built over the murky river Irk. New buildings arise along their banks, higher and tighter to them than ever before, deepening and darkening the urban ravines. But, in odd corners of leftover space or at the backs of graffitied warehouse walls, anglers can be spotted, and rowers train, proof that the waters are no longer the same stinking sewage which killed the legendary Mark Addy in the 19th century. And out of town, surprising greenspaces open up; grasslands, willow and alder carr, stands of buddleia and balsam; cows graze on Mersey meadows, horses pasture along the Irk. A strange, unruly rural-urbanity penetrates almost to the heart of the city. Further upstream, experiments in the 'renaturalisation' of the Medlock or flood attenuation at Castle Irwell are giving rise to the germs of a new peripheral waterscape which is surely a sign of an alternative future city.

Or I would picture Manchester, **the interstitial city**, of edgelands, social precipices, leftover pockets where transformation has been deemed economically unviable; where clearances, cranes and construction have not prospered. In the lost worlds trapped between abandoned infrastructures; in the chance spaces left between the once and future cities, Manchester's subcultures live on. The edgy spirit of Factory and Madchester, of the Hulme Crescents and the Moss Side gangs, of Afflecks Palace and Sankeys Soap, is harnessed as a useful piece of branding. But in the Northern Quarter, in Ancoats, in the central fringes of Salford, in Miles Platting, in damp basements, in half-condemned mills, the improvised bars, cafes, clubs and theatres fight back with a different vision of the future. The ginnels and alleys, run down back streets and corners are the remaining bastions of the old city.

And, spreading to the horizon, Manchester, **the patchwork city**, a sprawling carpet of suburban monotony huddled around the surviving relics of once thriving high streets and centres. Where multiple towns and villages have spread and merged, losing their separate identities in a shared Mancunianity. The recent rural past of iconic neighbourhoods is preserved only in their suggestive place names: Hulme, Moss Side, Salford, Levenshulme, Ordsall... names redolent of the low-lying, boggy wetlands which once surrounded the pre-industrial township. The newly arrived outsider exploring this strange new habitat experiences a sort of low-rise brick monotone, but, slowly settling into the city, will begin to distinguish the subtle tones and textures, the city's warp and weft, and to perceive its rhythms and hidden harmonies - or cacophonies. In places, the patchwork gains density and intensity, while in others it thins - barely held together by threads of infrastructure; a shiny new metrolink tram rumbles through corridors of knotweed; or along rutted streets with tokenistic cycle paths that are parked on and puddled over; or pavements so cut up and dug up by privatised utilities that they have become abstract asphalt murals.

And I would conjure up Manchester, **the photosynthetic city**, where, from a 6th floor office window, a forest canopy dominates the cityscape and blurs into the rising fells of the Pennines. Where is this forest on the ground? In the city centre it is barely visible, a tokenistic presence in a few squares and gardens. But, walk a little. You will find it in the public parks - planned and paid for by the people of a forgotten city, or given to the newly growing city by philanthropic industrialists - which have survived decades of neglect, the age of the car and mass entertainment, as monuments to a bygone age of the commons. Threatened with abandonment and privatisation, they survive on lottery money, volunteer energy and community spirit, and remain hubs of life, accommodating celebrations, exhibitions, performances, park runs and fetes, allotments and scout huts, festivals and punk picnics, footy, cricket and bowls, teenage gropes and sad lost souls. And you will find it in

the fertile, fruitful chaos of the allotments; or in the swathes of peripheral wilderness along river corridors and flood plains; the buffer strips along main roads, the parkways and greenways, the remnants of a garden city dream; and the millions of tiny pocket handkerchief gardens, each adding its fragment of glitter to the city's rich biosphere; the cricket grounds, the golf courses, the football pitches, the expanses of sterile amenity green, which nevertheless absorb, sponge and cool the regrowing city.

And, finally, I would come to Manchester, **the open city**, where a privileged central core is dotted with the products of our profession: the over-designed and under-maintained public spaces of the city centre, where, nevertheless, you will find the real Manchester. Not in the shiny new towers and office blocks; nor in the culture factories and architectural statements; nor even in the surviving mills and civic buildings; but here, in its imperfect public spaces, is where the city meets and recognises itself, reasserts itself, and where visitors come for the 'Manchester experience'. The civic spaces, the commercial plazas, the peaceful backwaters, the crowded pedestrianized shopping streets, the café and restaurant terraces, the market squares, the canal towpaths, the worn out lawns, the rotting benches, the terraced seating, the fountains and pools, the statues and public art, the stately trees, the cheesy flower beds, the big screens ... The spaces which, despite the lack of care, interest and investment, are where city life really happens: on weekday lunchtimes or sunny evenings, shopping sprees or nights out, international festivals and gay pride carnivals, protests and demonstrations, parades and celebrations, summer fairs and Christmas markets. And, of course, it is in these spaces where the city comes together to recognise its shared cityhood, at moments of triumph, or moments of tragedy, such as after the recent terrorist attacks, when the whole of St Anne's Square became a sea of flowers.

I would write about the many Manchesters, which after all, are just my version of all the cities which we experience, the landscapes which we inhabit and which define us, and which are so much more rich and diverse and colourful than our designed creations. So much more vivid and real than the natural capitals, ecosystem services, public realms and green infrastructures, the multiple acronyms under which we have buried our real subject matter, the human landscape.

1696 words

Images

Ruderal City:

1. *Birley Fields, Hulme*
2. *Contained wilderness in the Northern Quarter*
3. *Buddleia on cleared site at First Street*
4. *Chorlton Ees: Sewage works meadow*

Infill City:

1. *The Beatham Tower: From Deansgate Metrolink Station*
2. *Future skyscrapers rising behind the Victorian Knott Mill*
3. *Selective History 1: The Hacienda Apartments on the site of the legendary club*
4. *Selective History 2: A statue of Engels imported from Russia and placed in 'Tony Wilson Place' the heart of the new leisure quarter*

Accidental City Images:

1. *Cambridge Street Mills with new student residences*
2. *Student Tower at Cambridge Street*

Liquid City:

1. *Cows grazing on the banks of the Mersey*
2. *Dock 2 on the Ship Canal at Pomona Island*
3. *Sunset through birch on a forgotten stretch of the Bridgewater Canal*
4. *New development on the old BBC site, along side the overgrown Medlock*

Interstitial City Images:

1. *Space between Castlefield Viaducts*

Patchwork City:

No images

Photosynthetic City:

1. *Event in Whitworth Park during Manchester International Festival*
2. *Habitat corner of Alexandra Park, Whalley Range*
3. *Winter mist in Longford Park*
4. *Children's Art Installation in Chorlton Meadows*

Open City:

1. *Piccadilly Gardens*
2. *Chinese New Year Decorations in Albert Square*
3. *A sunny day in All Saints Gardens, MMU*
4. *Saint Anne's Square, sea of flowers after the MEN attack (Not my image – see link below)*

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